Protesters barely arrested

By MOLLY BENJAMIN
SPECIAL WRITER

PROVINCETOWN — A group of local women joined with beachgoers from Boston and elsewhere yesterday at Herring Cove Beach to protest the National Seashore management's policy of prohibiting shirt-free sunbathing by women.

Ten women eventually were arrested for refusing to put their shirts on. After being taken to jail in handcuffs, they were released and ordered to appear before a federal magistrate Sept. 17.

Yesterday was chosen for the protest, according to participants, because it was National Women's Equality Day.

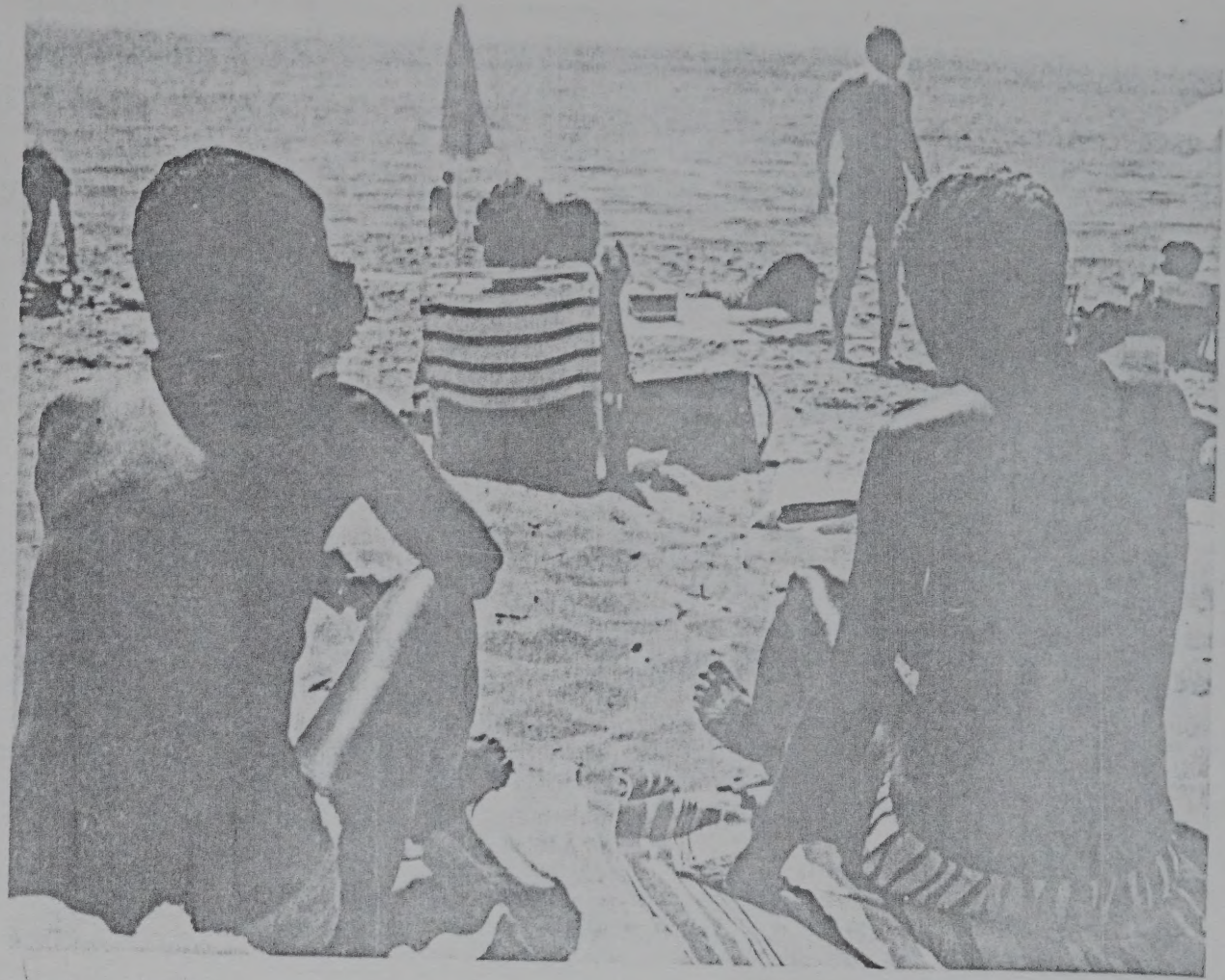
At the beach yesterday, more than 50 shirt-free women lay in the sun, and played in the water. Three shirtless women arrived by boat, waving at the women on shore.

Several women, determined to make a point, walked by the only Seashore ranger in the area, who did not respond.

After an hour, the women and their male supporters — one dressed in a T-shirt with breasts drawn on the front and the word "decoy" written on the back — strolled to the concession stand and bought drinks.

A protester called the Seashore's Provincetown headquarters and was told by a ranger that there would be no arrests unless someone at the beach signed a complaint.

"They (the rangers) will ticket people one by one all summer, they'll ticket when a woman is completely alone on the beach with no possible complainant," summer resident Bubba Geiger said. "Where are they when there's a show of force?"



TIMES PHOTO BY MOLLY BENJAMIN

Lyndell Weeks and Terri Warren, both of New York City, assert what they say is their right to go topless at Herring Cove Beach.

National Seashore chief ranger Irving Tubbs said after the arrests that his rangers had been busy elsewhere during most of the protest.

A group of rangers, later accompanied by the Provincetown police, finally met the most determined protesters, those who had walked to the beach's main entrance booth. Ten women were arrested and handcuffed.

Responding to a query concerning the alleged trivial nature of the protest, New York resident Lyndell Weeks said she gets angry over the discrimination she feels at the beach.

"Why shouldn't women be free to go topless?" she asked, commenting that other federally managed beaches permit shirt-free sunbathing.

"I don't think women should be hassled just to cover up. There's nothing indecent about it," said Terri Warren, also of New York.

"Men can sit on the beach with magazines of pictures of topless women. Yet when we walk by for our own pleasure, it's illegal," said Keishia Salko of Northampton.

All the women interviewed said they felt the regulation was discriminatory. Others noted that the U.S. District Court in Boston has repeatedly failed to hear any of the cases based on the Seashore's definition of nudity, which is that an exposed female breast constitutes nudity. Many women, along with American Civil Liberties Union spokesmen, have said that continued ticketing for this offense, given that the legal issue is not pursued by the courts, constitutes harassment.